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FM AMCONSUL GUANGZHOU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2085
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE
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RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 GUANGZHOU 018749

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STATE FOR EAP/CM, DRL and INR
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: Guangdong Muslims: Few but Increasing (C-DI5-01546)

REF: A) State 74399

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. The Guangdong Muslim population is small but rapidly increasing. The increasing numbers are due mostly to economic reasons (Guangdong's booming manufacturing economy attracts domestic and foreign Muslims) rather than religious ones (South China has no Islamic institution of higher learning). In a meeting with the Guangdong Province Muslim Association (GMA), while unswervingly patriotic and politically correct from a Chinese standpoint, the Association's leaders complained of the need for more imams in the province. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On June 14, the Guangdong Province Muslim Association (GMA) in Guangzhou City discussed with Econ/Pol Section Chief and Poloff about the demographics and religious climate of Guangdong's Muslim community. In addition to the increase numbers of domestic Muslims, Guangdong Province has also seen a rise in the number of foreign Muslims, particularly from the Middle Eastern countries of Yemen, Jordan and Syria (septel).

Background on Guangdong Muslim Associations

¶3. (SBU) The Chinese Islamic Association, located in Beijing, is the headquarters of all Chinese Muslim Associations. The Islamic Association is the link between the local Muslim communities and the religious affairs officials, including the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) and the United Front Work Department (UFWD). TQORAB and UFWD generally communicate instructions to imams and mosques via the Islamic Associations, many of whose members also serve on the RAB. Guangdong Province has a provincial Muslim Association office, as well as city offices in some of the province's largest cities: Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhaoqing and Zhuhai. The Guangdong office has eight people. Senior officers of the Association are volunteers, while the office staff (mostly recent university graduates) is paid a small salary. The leaders of the organization said it is self-organized and supported by donations. The GMA is run mostly with donations from Muslims and to a smaller extent by Provincial Government subsidy. The GMA is registered with the Guangdong Civil Affairs Bureau and the Guangdong Religious Affairs Bureau. In South China, Guangdong Province, Guangxi Autonomous Region and Fujian Province all have Muslim Associations. Hainan Province is currently in the process of establishing its own association.

14. (SBU) The Guangdong Muslim Association sees itself as "a bridge between believers and the government." Besides religious affairs, the GMA also helps to create job opportunities for Muslims, provides free translation services and carry out poverty relief programs. The GMA's services are not limited to domestic Muslims, though all of the Consulate's foreign Muslims contacts said they had never used the Association's services. The director of the GMA said all mosques in Guangdong have some kind of children's religious education; for example, both Guangzhou and Shenzhen mosques have summer religious training sessions for children. Every Saturday, the Shenzhen association has Arabic classes for children and elderly people.

The Guangdong Province Muslim Community

15. (SBU) According to the GMA, Guangdong Province has around 100,000 Muslims from ten ethnic minority groups, who mainly live in the cities of Guangzhou (Guangzhou was estimated by the South China Morning Post to have 50,000 Muslims), Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Zhongshan and Dongguan. About 85,000 of the domestic Muslims originally came from other provinces, the majority after the Reform and Opening Policy began in 1979 due to increased economic opportunities in the Province. There are between 10,000-15,000 foreign Muslims in Guangdong, mostly in Guangzhou and Shenzhen (Note: The GMA also said most foreign Muslims live in the cities of Beijing, Guangzhou, and Yiwu in Zhejiang Province. End note.). Guangdong Province has seven Muslim religious sites (six mosques and one ancient tomb). These mosques are administered by 11 imams throughout the province. The GMA said its statistics were based on two sources. First, the

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Association had statistics on the number of people who attended services and contacted the mosque's imam. Second, the Association took the number of Muslim trading companies in Guangdong and estimated number of employees.

16. (SBU) In case of death, Guangdong has three public tombs to inter domestic Muslims, though foreign Muslims whose relatives die in Guangdong usually face the difficult choice of local cremation or expensive repatriation of the body on the excuse that there is not enough land to bury foreigners. According to the association, Guangdong has several thousand Muslim restaurants, both large and small. Foreign Muslims have opened at around 100 Arabic restaurants in Guangdong, 18 of which are in Guangzhou City. Of the 100,000 Muslims in Guangdong, an estimated 30,000-50,000 are business people. However, according to the GMA, none of them has a large business entity or has a private investment of over 100 million yuan (12.5 million USD).

17. (SBU) Within the Muslim community, the GMA estimated almost 100 percent of Guangdong's Muslims are Sunni. According to the Association, only a very small minority of Guangdong's Muslims are Shiite, who are mostly ethnic Tajiks coming from Xinjiang Province. Some of the Consulate's other Middle Eastern contacts said that Muslims from Xinjiang are generally looked down upon by the Chinese in comparison with the Hui Muslims, who have facial features more similar to the Chinese. The GMA leaders did not mention any other minor sects in the province.

Send Us Some Imams!

18. (SBU) The GMA leaders complained of a dearth of imams in Guangdong, with only eleven to serve the Muslim population. The leaders have told the Chinese Islamic Association in Beijing they are looking for more imams and they expect more imams to be confirmed in the near future. The South China Morning Post (SCMP) was even more critical when it reported in 2005 that Guangzhou's mosques are filled to capacity.

The SCMP wrote that the city's three mosques only have enough room for 5,000 worshippers on Friday prayers. In addition to the limited space, some mosques are also in need of repair. One of the Guangzhou's mosques was cited by SCMP as tilting and cracking in 48 places. During the twice-yearly China Export Commodity Fair--when Muslim travelers flock to Guangzhou--the crush can be so great that Muslim believers spill out onto the footpath next to the mosque. The GMA admitted they have a number of applications for new mosques awaiting confirmation from the Religious Affairs Bureau. The city that most critically needs another mosque is Shenzhen, with a population of nine million and only one mosque. While the GMA director said the Shenzhen government has already designated a 7,000 square meter area to be developed for a new mosque, the application for the mosque is still awaiting government approval.

Imam Training

¶9. (SBU) One imam was present at the meeting and spoke about his background and training. The imam, who appears in his 30s, originally came from Xinjiang Province. In Guangdong, imams are required to have a four-year bachelor's education (this particular imam had studied at the China Islamic Institute). Once they obtain the degree, imam applicants must submit their application to the Islamic Association in Guangdong. According to the GMA, the Chinese government has no hand in the certification process. Instead the GMA itself has a committee of retired imams who create a training and exam system to confirm imam status to applicants. The imam present at the meeting said he had passed his exams in 2003 and went on to study at the International Islamic University in Pakistan in 2004. The imam's Arabic was rather good, because he had taken all his classes in Pakistan in Arabic.

Government Control of Religious Rituals

¶10. (SBU) According to the GMA, Muslims can easily buy the Koran in Muslims stores. The Koran comes from a state publishing house, authorized to print the books. What remains much harder for Chinese Muslims is establishing contacts with foreign Muslims. According to the GMA, last year 7,000 Chinese Muslims went to Mecca for the Hajj (which

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is an improvement from 20 Chinese Muslims a year in the 1950s). Of those, Guangdong only sent eight representatives, of whom most were elder members, presumably with vetted loyalties to the Chinese government. The GMA had to collectively decide on its applicants and then submit their names to the national Chinese Muslim Association. Besides the official seven mosques in Guangdong, the GMA was not aware of any underground Islamic groups. In terms of missionaries, every year the GMA briefly receives missionary delegations from Hong Kong, Pakistan and Malaysia.

¶11. (SBU) According to the GMA director, the Chinese government does not observe its meetings or religious services. Only in the case of "trouble" mosques, would the government send inspectors to observe services. The GMA members said they do not feel discriminated by the government, rather they think they receive better support because of their minority status.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The Guangdong Province Muslim Association leaders closely represented the government's opinion on Islam in China. The leaders said they were content with government support of religion in China and their only complaint was that the national Chinese Muslim Association had not provided them enough imams. In terms of domestic Muslim

activity, Guangdong Province has little significance. Guangdong Province, as well as Yiwu in Zhejiang, Province, however, are more significant because of their concentrations of foreign Muslims. In Guangdong Province, Muslim traders come from every potential Muslim country in the world (Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Central Asia) and potentially hold every Muslim religious viewpoint. The Consulate's septel on Middle Eastern Muslims in Guangdong will address some of the opinions and goals of the Middle Eastern population.

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